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James Toner
The Wedding Suit

Reflections
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This is a photograph of my great-grandfather, James Toner, taken sometime in November 1902, or shortly before. He's shopping for what I assume was his wedding suit—clearly an occasion worth documenting, since he even brought a photographer along. The photograph was mounted on hardboard, which was a significant choice for the time.

And here's where things always get interesting. Every time I write about the wedding dates, I stir up family debate. Everyone has their own version of the story. I certainly don't claim to be the expert here. I'm just documenting what I'm finding.

James Toner and Bertha Bright-Smith were married in Yoncalla, Oregon, in 1902. James arrived there sometime before 1900, though exactly when and how remains a bit of a mystery. One of my cousins insists he rode in on a fast horse. When pressed on what that means, she says, "It means he was running from the law."

James was born in County Down, Ireland, in 1870, in Ednego, Drummore Parish. He immigrated with his father and two stepbrothers sometime before 1900, passing through Toronto, where his brothers established themselves in the dairy business. As far as I can tell, the Toners are still there in Toronto. But this is where things get a little murky. Was his last name really Toner? Or, as one of my aunts insistently informed me, was his actual surname Russell? According to her, his name was changed to Toner when his mother remarried. That's going to take some digging. There's a lot of research to do, and I'll probably never find a definitive answer.

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My great-grandmother, Bertha Bright-Smith, was in danger of becoming an old maid—at the scandalous age of twenty-three. Imagine! I suspect she was being positioned as the one who would stay home to care for her aging parents. But Bertha had other plans. And so James showed up—slightly older, possibly on the run. They were married in November.

Their first baby, Francis, was born the following May. You can do the math. This is the part that always gets me into trouble. But I admire my great-grandmother—she took charge of her own future. And as for James? That poor Irishman never stood a chance.

Look closely at the photograph. Behind him there's a poster. If you zoom in, you'll see it presents a choice: wear a barrel or dress like a proper gentleman in a bowler hat and suit. He clearly went with the latter. Notice the newfangled electric light bulb hanging nearby.

Bowler hats have a fascinating history. In nineteenth-century Britain, they were popular among the working class, but by the early twentieth century they had become the signature look of businessmen—the city gents. The tradition faded during the twentieth century, but the image of a man in a bowler hat carrying a rolled umbrella remains a lasting symbol of British formality.

Where was this fine establishment? It could have been Yoncalla—I wonder whether a town of that size would have supported a store like this. But I don't know for sure. My best guess is Roseburg, about twenty-five miles away. He likely made the trip, picked out his wedding suit, posed for this photograph—bowler hat and all. Don't forget the umbrella!

And here he is—an Irishman far from home, in a new suit, standing at the edge of a new life.

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